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E-TOOLS

Keep Your Elbows off the Computer Table (and Online Etiquette that Mom Wants You to Know)

Bad online etiquette can send employee, peer, and client relations plummeting. Offenses are certainly prolific.

Michelle Golden • Sep. 26, 2012



Our parents taught us some basic social skills like keeping our elbows off the table and to have a firm, yet not death-grip, handshake. These are timeless but new scenarios have emerged. As a parent of four, I never considered that I should teach my kids some online etiquette, too. I wish I had, and at least my youngest will benefit from this reflection (lucky her!).

Other than “avoid all caps because it means you’re yelling,” there’s little guidance on how to be polite, polished, and effective using today’s modes of communication. Bad online etiquette can send employee, peer, and client relations plummeting. Offenses are certainly prolific.

So if mom taught us how to behave with all our electronic interactions, whether text, email, or other web-based channel, what are the three most important things she would have instructed?

Don’t skip “Hi” and “Bye”

As kids, most of us learned to answer the phone with something akin to: “Hello. Smith residence. To whom am I speaking?” and to end calls with: “Thank you for calling. Good bye.” Letters begin with “Dear” and end with “Cordially” but online, these openings and closings are usually absent. They aren’t just fancy formalities; they set a tone. They let people know our mindset. In print or online writing, we cannot consistently tell if someone is pleased or annoyed, calm or harried (and if harried or annoyed, is it due to us?) without clues.

When clues are absent, human nature dictates that the recipient will assume the worst.

With the first text you send in a day, or in any email, direct message, or instant message, greet someone before launching into your purpose for writing. Regardless of the sender’s intent, messages are perceived as demanding and curt when they lack an opening or when they end abruptly with no closing.

When did we become so rude? I think it probably preceded email and began with the fax coversheet. “See attached,” was innocent enough, but the beginning of very bad form. Is it really that hard to add, “Hello Jody, see attached. Best regards, Gene.”?

An opening as brief as “Hi,” is just fine in most cases. And when space permits, why not be even more pleasant with “Good morning” or “I hope this finds you well.”

Too many people are skipping sign-offs, too. Especially among colleagues or family members. Familiarity breeds contempt? If you don't routinely write a closing, create an email auto-signature "Best wishes, Joe." And if you send email from your handheld or tablet devices, tailor your auto-signature to indicate that you're using a mobile device. This helps recipients understand that general brevity is most likely due to your tiny, awkward keypad and not something related to how you feel about them.

And if you're done with your text, IM, or direct-message conversation, indicate it. "Gotta run, nice chatting," or even GTG, TTYL (got to go, talk to you later) is more considerate than disappearing without closure.

Acknowledge people who address you

Do you go to a party and refuse to interact? When people come to your home, do you pretend they aren't there? Of course not. Yet when people directly address each other electronically, all sorts of ignoring goes on.

We're all busy, but if someone comments on your blog post, or sends you an email, sending even a quick, "Thanks for your message, I'll give you a thoughtful reply as soon as possible!" goes a very long way.

If someone responds to your Facebook or LinkedIn post, or mentions you on their own or someone else's post, do acknowledge the fact that they've spoken to you. Clicking "like" or typing "thanks" takes less than two seconds. People who post things on LinkedIn, Twitter, Facebook, or blogs, and fail to acknowledge any comments at all, come across as aloof and arrogant.

And don't be exclusionary. Acknowledging some comments and not others is rude in a cliquy way. For the ignored person, it's the social equivalent of standing in a group of people, saying something, and having no one look at or respond to you. If someone routinely annoys or offends with their posts, consider disconnecting (aka "unfriending" or "unfollowing") them, or limit what they can see within your privacy settings.

Another way to be both well mannered and more effective online is to be hospitable and gracious at the time of connecting with someone. When you invite someone to connect on LinkedIn or Facebook, remind the person how you know one another ("nice meeting you at the conference reception last week") and say that you'd be honored to connect.

Once they accept, send another message saying “thanks” and that you’re looking forward to staying in touch. If someone invites you to connect, send a message thanking *them* for reaching out and, again, let them know you’re looking forward to staying in touch. If someone invited you to their home, you wouldn’t dream of not thanking them. Not doing so online is a missed opportunity for engagement as well as being inconsiderate.

If you’re genuinely too busy to reply when people address you through one communication vehicle or another, then perhaps you should exit that vehicle (e.g., close the Twitter account, disable Facebook, or sign out of Skype).

Help raise the bar. Don’t be aloof online. Interact with grace.

If you have nothing nice to say...

Running with the social truth that “attitude is everything,” if you wouldn’t broadcast complaints and bad news—especially woe-is-me stuff—at a bar-b-que or birthday bash, why on earth would you do so on your social web page? Everyone has a bad day. Everyone gets sick. It’s even okay to share a little about these things once in awhile. But watch that you’re not too much of an Eeyore.

Saying, “today stinks, why does this always happen to me” illustrates someone’s glass-half-empty mindset whereas, “rough day, looking forward to tomorrow” shows a more positive outlook. Chronic negativity isn’t something you ever want to project online. Look at your past postings and if you see a trend, try to turn it around.

If you just can’t describe your moods and feelings without being a drag, then stick to posting content that isn’t personal—funny news, articles you find interesting, even inspirational quotes; just not downer stuff that would be better aired in your private journal.

Also in the not nice category is the subject of name-dropping. Name-dropping to get ahead is never OK, so don’t tag or reference people just to get on their radar screen (or Facebook wall). Work on building genuine, reciprocal relationships instead. Most importantly, never diss the competition, complain about coworkers or bosses, or rip the company. And even if your intent is to compliment and flatter, never, ever name clients or refer to projects unless you have specific permission to do so.

Similarly, be very cautious about tagging or naming any people in your posts, especially in photos, in a way that references them being at a certain place at a certain time. You just never know if it might get them in hot water. It’s probably okay

to name someone who's at a formal business function—especially if they've already posted that they are there—but refrain from posting photos they don't know about in advance. And, unless you have permission to tag them, let them tag themselves.

You've probably heard the advice to never post anything online that you wouldn't want your mother to see. That's a good rule of thumb. To take it a step further, treat everyone online in a way that would make mom proud. And teach your kids to do that, too!

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